Este volume, da iniciativa do Centro de Estudos Anglísticos da Universidade de Lisboa e do Departamento de Estudos Anglísticos da Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa, reúne um elevado número de contributos de colegas, familiares e amigos do Professor Doutor João de Almeida Flor, e pretende testemunhar, de uma forma simbólica, o reconhecimento da sua exemplar dedicação enquanto docente, dirigente e investigador. A diversidade e a profundidade dos seus interesses académicos, patentes no *Curriculum Vitae* incluído no volume, justificam o grande apreço e admiração que sempre suscitou em quem pode acompanhar a sua carreira. Com efeito, o elevado nível intelectual do seu trabalho académico, quer na docência, quer na investigação, marcado pelo rigor e excepcional eloquência que sempre caracterizaram o seu magistério, deixam uma marca indelével em todos aqueles que tiveram o privilégio de ser seus alunos, orientandos e/ou seus colegas.

HOMENAGEM
A JOÃO DE ALMEIDA FLOR

A scholar for all Seasons

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Our Burmese Days: a personal odyssey in the context of the British Colonial Past

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The British Empire represented a crucial aspect of national identity and race consciousness. Its greatness and grandiosity, at least until the eve of the First World War, demarcated an imperial identity based not only on race and colour, but also on class, hierarchy and status. (Cannadine, 2001: 121-122, 126) These differences were vital in order to validate the Empire building and settlement, since the British, grounded on the discourse of God's chosen and supremacy, "would bring the benefits of their superior civilization to others" (Hall, 2008: 203). The discourse of the civilizing mission which Britain endured played an important part in the construction of identity, based on differences of race, of class, of ethnicity, of gender and of sexuality that distinguished the coloniser from the colonised. Catherine Hall (2008: 203) speaks of 'grammars of difference' which placed peoples hierarchically, some being seen as having greater capacity and more rights than other. African or Indians were not the same as Britons.

This idea of a superior, blessed people was also propagated by many historians in the 19th century who would undoubtedly declare the British wisdom and superiority which would substantiate its world sovereignty. The awareness that the sun always shines on every part of the British Empire represented one of the main mottos of the imperial discourse of the late nineteenth century. The Crimean War (1853-56), the victory over the Indians during the Indian Mutiny (1857-8), the substantial territorial expansion between 1850 and 1914, the Boer Wars (1880-1; 1899-1902), the control over east and southern Africa, just to mention some examples, endorsed the British strength both at home and worldwide. Despite the criticisms of many liberal politicians on imperial expansion for its own sake, namely William Gladstone, J. A. Hobson and L. T. Hobhouse, the British still held not only on an ideology of mission but, most importantly, on power politics and military and economic interests.

Jingoism and Christian proselytism concurred to the growth of popular imperialist sentiment at home. As Mackenzie (1986: 3) states:

> In the emergence of the new nationalisms 'state, nation, and society converged' and the elite which promoted this convergence created new rituals, a whole range of invented traditions and cults through which it could be communicated to the public. (...) in Britain the nationalist convergence took a distinctively imperial form in the defence of real and imagined colonial interests.

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The British were at home with the Empire as it was present in the everyday lives of ordinary people, inculcating a sense of nationalism in British people that made them aware of their superiority towards the others, that is, the natives from the colonies whose skin colour, texture of hair, capacity of reason were significantly different (Hall & Rose, 2006: 22-23). According to Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose (25), 'to be 'at home' with the Empire is to imagine the imperial world under control by the metropolis and a state of affairs that one can and does live with.'

Based on these imperial discursive practices, it is our task to analyse and comment on two works which depict the British Empire and its people, the novel *Burmese Days* by George Orwell and the documentary *Our Burmese Days* by Lindsey Merrison, in order to understand the different discourses of both colonisers and colonised. We will delve more specifically into the role of the protagonists of these two works — Sally Merrison, Flory and U Po Khin — regarding their attitudes towards the Empire.

Our Burmese Days (1996) exemplifies a revealing documentary about the past of a Eurasian family and it is a glimpse of life in a country haunted by an imperial past. The director Lindsey Merrison takes her mother back to Burma, the place where she was born, even though this was a secret kept from her and her brother until they were adults. The mother, Sally Merrison, an immigrant to England in the late 50s, ashamed of her heritage insists in denying her Burmese identity by cultivating an impeccable, flawless English accent, and by undoubtedly claiming that she is English because she feels English.

Given that the documentary's title comes from George Orwell's novel *Burmese Days*, it is thus relevant to draw some comparison between Sally's prejudice towards Burma, a former British colony now known as Myanmar, and its culture, and *Burmese Days*' key character, U Po Khin, who strives to be on the side of the British and to become a parasite upon them. One of the main purposes of this paper is to comment on some scenes of the documentary, sketching some passages of Orwell's novel that might have some resemblance with the documentary, which allow us to assess, on the one side, how the British saw the natives and, on the other, how the natives saw the white European people, and how did the imperial stance influence to form and shape a person's identity.

Burmese Days was published in 1936 and represents the result of Orwell's stay in Burma as a police officer.[1] That experience helped him to define his opinion on imperialism and colonialism. What he expected to become a great adventure turned out a disappointing journey however enlightening on the perils of imperialism. His position is also well portrayed in two of his autobiographical essays: 'A Hanging' and 'Shooting an Elephant' where he stresses the real nature of imperialism (Orwell, 1983: 19):

[1] Burma was brought under British rule and part of the British Empire in 1885, after a gradual conquest which began in 1824. George Orwell worked as a police officer in Burma from 1922 to 1927.

> For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters.

The setting of *Burmese Days* is in Katha, almost 200 miles north of Mandalay, Orwell's last post, after being sent to five different places in Burma, namely Rangoon, as it is shown in the map below (figure 1).

Figure 1: Meyers (2000: 51)

Burmese Days is about the work and life of British officials among Orientals, and about how the society was organized for the British and for the natives, depicting the colonial mentality and emphasizing gender and class differences which revealed fundamental in the Anglo-Indian hierarchy.

Flory, the hero of the story, is a British officer who admires the natives' culture and traditions and condemns colonialism and the British hostility to the Burmese. As Flory states in a conversation with his Indian friend, Doctor Veraswami (1983: 95): 'The British Empire is simply a device for giving trade monopolies to the English — or rather to gangs of Jews and Scotchmen,' and he adds further ahead 'We teach the young men to drink whisky and play football, I admit, but precious little else. We've never taught a single useful manual trade to the Indians. We daren't;

frightened of the competition in industry.' Dr Veraswami of course didn't believe in these arguments, blaming the Oriental character, grounded on apathy and superstition.

When Flory takes Elizabeth, Mr. Lackersteen's niece (another British officer) just returned from Paris and anxious to get a husband, to the bazaar, he was eager to interest her in things Oriental. However, in Elizabeth's thought, Flory was asking her to be fond of the Burmese, to admire people with black faces, almost savages (143):

> He was forever praising Burmese customs and the Burmese character; he even went so far as to contrast them favourably with the English. It disquieted her. After all, natives were natives – interesting, no doubt, but finally only a 'subject' people, an inferior people with black faces. (...) He so wanted her to love Burma as he loved it, not to look at it with the dull, incurious eyes of a memsahib.

Flory also shows profound admiration for his servants and especially for Dr. Veraswami. The Indian doctor considers the British civilized people in opposition to the barbarian natives and being an Englishman's friend was one of the most prestigious things he could achieve for prestige was, for him, everything (95):

> 'My friend, it iss pathetic to me to hear you talk so. It iss truly pathetic. You say you are here to trade? Of course you are. Could the Burmese trade for themselves? Can they make machinery, ships, railways, roads? They are helpless without you. What would happen to the Burmese forests if the English were not here? They would be sold immediately to the Japanese, who would gut them and ruin them. In your hands, actually they are improved. And while your businessmen develop the resources of our country, your officials are civilizing us, elevating us to their level, from pure public spirit. It is a magnificent record of self-sacrifice'.

U Po Khin, the character who represents the ambitious and scoundrel natives struggling to be successful in life no matter what, tired of associating only with Burmese, whom he considered poor and inferior, and living like a miserable Township Officer, wanted to reach fame and greatness among the British. U Po Khin's most sacred desire was to achieve glory and the highest honour an oriental can attain to by being a member of the European club. U Po Khin excitingly described (159) the club as:

> that remote, mysterious temple, that holy of holies for harder of entry than Nirvana! Po Khin the naked gutter-boy of Mandalay, the thieving clerk and obscure official, would enter that sacred place, call Europeans 'old chaps', drink whisky and knock white balls to and fro on the green table!

U Po Khin bemoaned his own race and admired the British culture and by getting the club's membership he would feel part of the same world, an elevated and superior world. Therefore, his traps to degrade Dr. Veraswami and Flory were only carried out because of the deep desire of prestige among the British, not because of money. Feeling, however, that by being an Englishman he was above

suspicion, Flory couldn't, in the end, avoid being trapped by U Po Khin's decoys.

The club was in fact one of the most defining and restraining *topoi* in British colonies. According to Geoffrey Meyers (2000: 50) 'the limitations of white society, the profound ennui and isolation of the officials are portrayed in the club scenes of Orwell's *Burmese Days*. The Club is not alone a place of enjoyment, it is a symbol of racial solidarity.' In *Burmese Days* (1983: 81) the club is depicted as 'the spiritual citadel, the real seat of the British power, the Nirvana for which native officials and millionaires pine in vain.' However, no Oriental had been admitted to membership.

Similarly, in the documentary, Sally Merrison, an Anglo-Burmese, presents ambiguous attitudes towards Burma and Burmese people and we can find some similarities between her and U Po Khin, striving to be accepted by the British. Nonetheless, Sally, more drastically, cuts off with her Burmese roots and rather presumptuously denies her Burmese identity, even though she had spent the first 17 years of her life in Burma, the most formative years in a person's life. Whenever questioned about the place she comes from, she simply tells people she comes from Hemel Hempstead,[2] because it is too complicated a story to tell. It's simply a problem she doesn't want to discuss. She loathes speaking about her roots and she argues that there is nothing Freudian about it, nothing psychological. Looking at Burmese people in a British perspective, it is rather off putting for Sally dealing with crowds of people who are just different from her. As she argues, she doesn't have the Asiatic mind, because she hadn't been brought up to have an Asiatic mind. All her friends were of European extraction. Her father (white), an accountant and an established shipping officer, wouldn't allow her and her brother William Franklin (Bill) to speak Burmese. They were forbidden to speak it and even to fraternize among Burmese children. And again her father followed a strict hierarchy in the social ladder. Servants were servants, they knew their place. Even though her mother acted quite differently from her father, her father's influence has won over Sally.

Despite enjoying a particular status within the Anglo-Burmese community, they couldn't escape from the established hierarchy that Rangoon had at that time. There were the Anglos, the Indian and the Anglo-Burmese. Her father was therefore not allowed the entrance to the British sacrosanct clubs. There was no way he could be invited to British controlled clubs. He had his own Anglo-Burmese agreement clubs. And, of course, he didn't mind.

When the two brothers, Sally and Bill, speak about this subject one clearly notices the difference between Bill and Sally's attitudes towards Burma. Bill, in a rather modest approach, says he feels a bit of Portuguese, a bit of Burmese and a bit of English. He considers himself as a half-caste, because truly if they look into the mirror they will see they're not English. As Bill argues, the features are simply

[2] Town in Hertfordshire in the East of England, 24 miles (38.6 km) to the north west of London and part of the Greater London Urban Area. Also a byword for white, middle-class respectability.

wrong. Even though Sally speaks as an English person, or has an English lifestyle, the mirror will tell her that she is not English. Bill thinks himself as Asian and if Sally and he were in South Africa, for example, they would be called coloured. Bill doesn't believe her sister when she says that she felt English even when she was living in Burma. That can't be true. Again, Bill gets no reply, because Sally refuses entering into that topic.

Even though U Po Khin hadn't ever been to England, his sole desire was to live, act and speak like the British and, for him, the ascension to the most symbolic and emblematic temple of British culture represented being accepted by equals. In the end he manages to get the club's membership, through a whole series of plots and briberies whose outcome was Dr. Veraswami and Flory's disgrace. Dr. Veraswami was transferred to Mandalay General Hospital, with a reduced pay, and Flory committed suicide.

Sally Merrison, in the odyssey to her birthplace acts as if she doesn't belong there always behaving as a visitor touring the place one day she lived in. She categorically refuses to discuss the subject of her origins because she has no use for the past and, after all, her identity is English, she feels English despite the colour of her skin, and as U Po Khin, she has no feeling for the Burmese because she grew up hearing the British discourse of superiority. Burma meant simply a negative and excluded dimension in the formation of her identity.

In conclusion, on the one side, Sally Merrison and U Po Khin, and Flory on the other, represent good examples of how the British Empire influenced both the colonised and the colonisers for better or for worse, and their prejudiced attitudes reflect sustained widespread racist assertions and assumptions that the Empire provided both at home and in British territorial possessions.

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